

Let's talk tomatoes

Janice Lloyd • Gannett News Service • June 27, 2010

Longing for a perfect tomato?

If so, whether you grow your own or plan to buy them at the farmers market, you're one of the millions counting down the days to the first taste of this summer's vine-ripened fruits.

And if you're seriously tomato-obsessed, you're in good company there, too.

"You take a bite and it's rapturous," said Laurel Garza, owner of Heirloom Tomato Plants, a nursery. "People's eyes roll back in their heads."

But wait. Is Garza talking about heirlooms or hybrids? The tomato-obsessed have firm, sometimes fanatical, opinions as to which is superior, with heirlooms getting most of the snooty vote. But Garza is talking about both.

She and a growing number of tomato aficionados are challenging tomato lovers to sample certain hybrids that burst with flavor and thumb their noses at diseases. "There are a few carefully selected hybrids that are just as good as heirlooms," she said. "I taste everything I sell. Tomato love is something we do not take lightly."

The tomato is by far America's most popular home garden crop. The obsessed will tell you that the quality of fruit picked in the garden when fully ripe far surpasses anything available on the market, even in season.

Heirloom die-hards may disagree, but Garza argues that some hybrids have earned the right to share the tomato tiara with heirlooms. These are not your daddy's hybrids. They're a big improvement over those produced in the early 1900s, designed to give tomatoes a longer shelf life, better disease resistance and productivity.

To produce hybrids, scientists cross-breed several plants, giving the hybrid offspring the best qualities of both parents. Heirlooms, on the other hand, have been passed down from generation to generation. They are prized for their diversity of color, but they can be hard hit by diseases and have smaller and

later yields.

Which hybrids are getting good reviews?

In a taste test reported in the March issue of Martha Stewart Living, the little hybrid Sapho is savored among several dozen others. George Ball, chairman of W. Atlee Burpee & Co., said his Brandy Boy won a blindfold taste test over Brandywine, considered a champion heirloom. Park Seed sold out its Glory seeds this season.

One of Garza's favorites, Sun Gold, is also a staff favorite at White Flower Farm in Connecticut and Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture in Westchester County.

Jack Algieri, the manager at Stone Barns, grows heirlooms and hybrids. Last summer, when late blight hit, he had to tear out many plants, but not Sun Gold or Mountain Magic, the only tomato known to be resistant to late blight.

The disease hit a wide geographic area last summer from South Carolina to Maine and west to Ohio. Tomato growers were as distraught as the Whos in Whoville after the Grinch struck.

What's the difference?

But Mountain Magic was steadfast. Chef Dan Barber says the hybrid "tastes every bit as good" as an heirloom. His Blue Hill restaurants at Stone Barns

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and in Manhattan serve organic produce from Algieri's fields. The chef used Mountain Magic as one of his premier tomatoes. "In August, we use tomatoes in every course," he said. "It's the time of year when tomatoes are the most important part of the menu."

Mountain Magic is the magic of plant breeder Randy Gardner, who developed it when he worked at North Carolina State University. He is retired from the university but still works with several other plant breeders, including Martha Mutschler at Cornell. That's how Mountain Magic came to Algieri and Barber — Mutschler does tomato testing at Stone Barns.

"I think they taste just as good or better than heirlooms," Mutschler said.

Gardner acknowledges that "some of the people who grow heirlooms won't admit the hybrids are good." And so the arguments will continue.

Tomato varieties number in the thousands, have many wonderful flavors and more are on the way. There are so many subtle differences, it's as much fun as wine and olive oil tasting, Garza says. So what's to fight about?

"People need to give hybrids a chance," she said. "If they don't, it's because they're snobs and don't know any better."